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ABSTRACT

Two hundred forty-five students in a basic speech making course were tested both before and after the course by the Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale (RHETSEN) and by their reactions to three hypothetical speech situations, to determine: (1) whether their rhetorical sensitivity scores would change after completion of such a course, and (2) whether audience sensitivity scores changed. The RHETSEN, consisting of 40 Likert-type items, measured such factors of rhetorical sensitivity as interpersonal candor, inventional complexity, and interaction consciousness. In each of the three hypothetical speech situations (the audience sensitivity instrument), a speaker was asked to speak to a designated audience about a general topic. The instrument asked students to indicate in writing how they would have approached the task of preparing a speech for each of the three occasions. Test scores and content analysis revealed positive significant differences. It was therefore concluded that students enrolled in the basic communication course did experience an increase in both rhetorical sensitivity and audience sensitivity scores. (HOD)

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Teaching Rhetorical and Audience Sensitivity

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Teaching Rhetorical and Audience Sensitivity

ABSTRACT

Do students in a basic speech-making course become more rhetorically and audience sensitive? Two hundred forty-five (245) subjects were pre- and post-course tested by (1) the RHETSEN Communication Survey and by (2) their reactions to three hypothetical speech situations. Test scores and content analysis revealed positive significant differences.

It appears that the kind of speech communication training studied here encourages the development of rhetorically sensitive attitudes as well as the development of increased awareness or sensitivity to audiences.

Teaching Rhetorical and Audience Sensitivity

The Problem

Do students in a basic speech-making course become more attitude sensitive about encoding spoken messages and about audience analysis? Specifically: (1) Do rhetorical sensitivity scores (from Hart, Carlson & Eadie measures)[1] change after the completion of such a course? (2) Do audience sensitivity scores (as measured by a hypothetical situation instrument) change?

Procedures

Measurement Instruments

Two "before and after" instruments were used? A Communication Survey, known as The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale or RHETSEN, and an Audience Sensitivity Measure.

The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale operationalizes the concept of rhetorical sensitivity as first conceived by Hart and Burks in 1972.[2] Darnell and Brockriede had contributed to the theoretical development of the concept of rhetorical sensitivity by suggesting that rhetorical sensitivity is a midpoint on a continuum which has polar points known as Reflectors and Noble Selves.[3] Hart, Eadie and Carlson collaborated to write items which would identify the rhetorically sensitive persons.[4]

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Then Carlson's work later concentrated on developing a more reliable scale which also maintained validity.[5] The Rhetorical Sensitivity Scale or RHETSEN was then published in Communication Monographs.[6]

The reliability of RHETSEN was assessed by the test-retest method of assessing reliability.[7] Then three procedures were devised to establish the predictive validity of the instrument.[8] Next Carlson devised RHETSEN II to increase reliability and validity.[9] Also, Carlson worked on the problems of operationalizing the construct of rhetorical sensitivity as a means of giving insight into human communicative behavior, attempting to assess the characteristics of the rhetorically sensitive and non-sensitive persons, and determining the degree of rhetorical sensitivity associated with definable interpersonal contexts.[10] In its final form RHETSEN II measured Rhetorical Sensitivity, the Noble Self, and the Rhetorical Reflector to assess encoding attitudes. Carlson described the three factors of rhetorical sensitivity as interpersonal candor, inventional complexity, and interaction consciousness.[11]

RHETSEN consists of 40 items which were presented in a Likert-type format. The method of scoring the responses was novel since the responses were weighted differentially.[12]

A measurement of Audience Sensitivity was developed cooperatively with Professor Raymond S. Ross. After piloting, the final version of the Audience Sensitivity Instrument consisted of three hypothetical situations. In each one, a speaker has been asked to speak to a designated audience about a general

topic. This instrument was given to subjects who were asked to indicate in writing how they would approach the task of preparing a speech for each of the three occasions. Content analysis was done as follows. Students, whose responses indicated in two out of the three hypothetical situations that they had an awareness of the necessity to adapt the message for a specific audience, were deemed audience sensitive. They were placed in a "Yes" category and scored as 1. The "No" category then indicated that the students only referred to the task of preparing the speech and did not include any information about the need to prepare the message for a particular audience. "No" was scored as 2. The quantity written or the amount of space taken to write the answer was deemed unimportant. A reliability check between two raters (Pearson Product Moment) produced an r of .82.[13]

Two hundred forty-five (245) subjects' rhetorical sensitivity scores and audience sensitivity scores were obtained through classroom testing sessions at both the beginning and the end of a semester.

Statistical Methods

To determine if there were significant differences between the pretests and posttests, Hotelling's T^2, a multivariate analogue of the t-test, was used to compare the four pretest scores in one set with the four posttest scores in the other set.[14] By using this single test of significance, Hotelling's T^2, the dangers of multiple significance tests were avoided. The test was run on standardized scores so that all

scores would be on the same metric.

Hotelling's T^2 was 74.825. This is equivalent to an F ratio of 10.281 with 7 and 151 degrees of freedom and has a probability of less than .000005 ($p < .000005$).

Since Hotelling's T^2 was significant, it was then considered appropriate to run individual t-tests comparing the pretest and posttest scores on the measure.

Results

Each of the tests was significant. Therefore, it was concluded that students enrolled in the basic communication course do experience an increase in both rhetorical sensitivity scores and audience sensitivity scores. A summary of the results of the one-tailed t-tests is given in Table 1. Both true scores (not standardized) and gain scores are reported.

Insert TABLE 1 about here

For the rhetorical sensitivity measure, there was a significant increase from pretest to posttest ($t = 5.14$, $df = 243$, $p < .000$); the gain score was +2.2377.

For the rhetorical reflector measure, there was a significant decrease from pretest to posttest ($t = -2.44$, $df = 216$, $p < .008$); the gain score was -0.5991.

For the noble self measure, there was a significant decrease from pretest to posttest ($t = -5.83$, $df = 216$, $p < .000$); the gain score was -2.0323.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF t-TESTS

Measure	Gain Scores	t-Test Value	Degrees of Freedom	One-tailed Probability
Rhetorical Sensitivity	+2.2377	+5.14	243	0.000
Audience Sensitivity	-0.1527	-5.13	202	0.000
Rhetorical Reflector	-0.5991	-2.44	216	0.008
Noble Self	-2.0323	-5.83	216	0.000

For the audience sensitivity measure, there was a significant increase in audience sensitivity. In this instance, audience sensitivity was originally coded as 1 and lack of audience sensitivity was coded as 2. Consequently, the t value will be reported as a negative number ($t = -5.13$, $df = 202$, $p < .000$); the gain score was -0.1527.

Mean Scores Compared to Norms

Scrutiny of the mean pretest and posttest scores displayed in Table 2 on the four instruments reveals that on the rhetorical sensitivity measure, the pretest mean was 30.8279 with a standard deviation of 7.553. The posttest mean was 33.0656 with a standard deviation of 7.402. N = 245. Students increased in their rhetorical sensitivity scores during the time they participated in a basic communication class which stressed both public speaking skills and understanding speech fundamentals.

A comparison of the mean scores of the subjects in this study with the norm[15] established in 1978 shows that the subjects in this study scored lower on the Rhetorical Sensitivity measure at the beginning of the term than those who participated in the establishment of the norm, but at the end of the term, the subjects in this study scored higher than those who established the national norm as 31.8 with a standard deviation of 7.5.

On the rhetorical reflector measure, the mean score of the subjects in this study was 5.8940 on the pretest mean with a standard deviation of 3.984. The subjects scored 5.2949 on

the posttest with a standard deviation of 3.848. N = 217.

The mean of the rhetorical reflector scores for the national norm[16] was 7.0 with a standard deviation of 3.8. The subjects in this study scored lower on both the pretest and posttest than the national norm. Furthermore, the subjects also showed a slight decrease in the mean rhetorical reflector score over time.

On the noble self measure, the subjects in this study had a mean score of 16.2811 on the pretest with a standard deviation of 6.507. The mean score on the posttest was 14.2488 with a standard deviation of 6.583. N = 217.

When the mean scores are compared with the national norm for the noble self measure, it can be observed that the subjects of this study had a higher mean score on the pretest and a lower mean score on the posttest than the norm which was 15.1 with a standard deviation of 6.3.[17]

On the audience sensitivity measure, developed for this study, the pretest mean was 1.8621 with a standard deviation of 0.346. The posttest mean was 1.7094 with a standard deviation of 0.455. N = 203. In this instance those identified as audience sensitive were scored as 1 and those who were rated as not being audience sensitives were scored as 2. Thus the downward shift in scores on this measure indicated an increase in audience sensitivity.

Insert TABLE 2 about here

TABLE 2

MEAN PRETEST AND POSTTEST SCORES

Measure	Pretest			Posttest			Change Gain Score
	n. of cases	mean	std. dev.	n. of cases	mean	std. dev.	
Rhetorical Sensitivity*	244	30.8279	7.553	244	33.0656	7.402	+2.237
Audience Sensitivity**	203	1.8621	0.346	203	1.7094	0.455	-0.1527
Rhetorical Reflector**	217	5.8940	3.984	217	5.2949	3.848	-0.5991
Noble Self**	217	16.2811	6.507	217	14.2488	6.583	-2.0323

*On Rhetorical Sensitivity, a positive change in gain score was desirable.

**On Audience Sensitivity, Rhetorical Reflector, and Noble Self, a negative change in gain score was desirable.

Discussion

The findings of this study appear to define an educational environment, such as is found in the basic course studied, where changes in rhetorical sensitivity do occur. Therefore, the findings should contribute to the body of literature which surrounds the nature of the basic course. Much has previously been written about the appropriate focus for the basic course as well as about appropriate strategies for beginning speech students. Based on this study, it can be said that the basic public speaking course studied fosters significant changes in the rhetorical sensitivity and audience sensitivity scores of individuals.

Increases in rhetorical sensitivity scores and audience sensitivity scores are probably related only in part to the course emphasis on audience analysis and audience psychology. Other aspects of the course might well contribute to the increases in rhetorical sensitivity scores. Nevertheless, the emphasis in the course examined in this study and in the text used[18] is on the need to be sensitive to audiences so that each message is prepared for a specific audience. Everything that a speaker says to an audience must be appropriate for that specific audience. Such focusing appears to influence the increases in rhetorical sensitivity scores and audience sensitivity scores. This approach does not mean that speakers must say only those words which are pleasing to the audience, but rather that they must decide, first, what to say and then, second, how to say it.

Today practitioners of the art of speaking soon learn to respect an audience-based approach to communication. ". . . the audience is the single most important variable in public communication because ultimately it determines the success or failure of the speaker and his message."[19]

The necessity to consider the audience prior to and during the time speakers prepare messages has, however, a long rhetorical tradition. "For of the three elements in speech-making--speaker, subject, and person addressed--it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object."[20]

Since it appears that rhetorical sensitivity scores do change during the time that beginning speech students are enrolled in a course which stresses both a public speaking approach and fundamentals of speaking, future research might address the following: one, it would be relevant to determine behavioral correlates of such attitudes. Speeches could be taped at the beginning and end of the term to determine whether students do actually attempt to make adaptations for the audience. Suitability of topic for a college audience could be noted as well as appropriateness of adaptation of the topic for the audience.

Two, to determine behavioral correlates of those who are rhetorical sensitives, rhetorical reflectors, or noble selves, students could be asked to volunteer to prepare a short message for a specified audience. At the time the subject reported to give the presentation, an audience different than the one expected would be in place. The subject's attempts to

adapt messages to the audience could be coded and his overall behavior analyzed.

Three, to determine whether the approach to the course is the primary variable, students in the beginning communication courses could be compared to those in interpersonal communication, a combination course of public speaking and interpersonal communication, a course in readings in communication, or small group communication.

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